

# Vesak Thoughts 2004

The Message of Buddhism is Blissful to the World - 1	1
The Buddha's Dhamma and Buddhist Brahmachariya - 2	3
Stepping into the Buddhist Path to Liberation - 3	4
Layman's Link with the Life of Brahmachariya - 4	6
Upgrading the Quality of Layman's Sīla - 5	7
From Moral Rectitude to Culture of the Mind - 6	9

## **The Message of Buddhism is Blissful to the World - 1**

*Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari*

*Sukho Buddhānaṃ uppādo.* More than twenty-five centuries of recorded world history has proved that the message of Buddhism has been blissful to the world. Let us just take a look at what really has happened in history. The genesis of Buddhism, believe me, is a very down to earth process. It happened so far, far away in history, giving later writers on religious history a chance to make it a multi-dimensional kaleidoscopic fairy tale. But let not this aspect of literary skill rob the historical worth of the story of Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama was not a divine emissary. He did not come down from heaven with anyone's message.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in North India about four or five centuries before the commencement of the Christian era. He was born as the son of a provincial ruler in the region of the Himalayan slopes. He was undoubtedly of the Sakyan community but obviously his clan leaned heavily on the pursuit of agriculture. The names of his father and his paternal uncles, like Suddhodana, Dhotodana and Amitodana reveal their connection with rice-growers.

Buddhists have to necessarily believe that humans are born in this world,

because of their connection with a past, and that in consequence of this have different levels intellectual development and judgemental maturity. This is what we Buddhists maintain as Samsaric development, its opposite being our own mental deterioration as we proceed from birth to birth.

What is important to remember here is that our Siddhartha was born with a highly developed intellectual judgemental power. He saw in the world many things which the average individual does not see. Long before today's advancement in medical science and the development and production of multi-purpose scanners, Siddhartha as a young boy in the household saw the frailty of the human body, its proneness to disease and the continuous repetition of this through a ceaseless life process. This, undeniably, is a painful process even during one life time. How much of wisdom have we to see the magnitude of its misery in a Samsaric dimension?

Not only did Siddhartha, human as he was, see this unsatisfactoriness or *dukkha* but also had the capacity, with his earnest application, to discover a way out of it. This was his unique achievement in becoming the Buddha.

He repeatedly said that as the Buddha this is what he had to give to the world at all times: the unique truth about *dukkha* and the truth about its cessation or terminating it [*dukkhañ ca aham paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodham*]

During this Vesak season when the young Prince Siddhartha was born, well over two and a half millennia ago, and thirty-five years thereafter on the self same full moon day of Vesak he became the Fully Enlightened Buddha, let us peacefully realize how blissful this message can be to all mankind, through the length and breadth of the world, tearing asunder the menacing petty considerations of ethnicity, religious identities and political ideologies which are undeniably plaguing the world today.



## The Buddha's Dhamma and Buddhist Brahmachariya -

### 2

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

It is said of Siddhartha Gautam, that on becoming the Buddha more than two thousand five hundred years ago, he made known to the world his newly discovered teaching which is wholesome in the beginning, wholesome in the middle and wholesome in the end. This **dhamma** deals, in its theory of the Four Noble Truths, with a true exposition of the way of the world in which we live, and indicates thereafter a way which leads those who follow it to a specific goal of liberation. The first area of his activity is referred to as *dhammaṃ deseti*. The first three of the Noble Truths explains theoretically the way of the world as being rooted in *dukkha*, the genesis or *samudaya* of this *dukkha* in craving and the termination or *nirodha* of this *dukkha* in the total abandonment of craving. As the way out of this *dukkha* is given the fourth truth or *magga* which is the Noble Eight-fold Path.

In many places in the Canonical texts where the Buddha is presented as making known to the world his newly discovered doctrine [*dhammaṃ deseti*], he is made to follow this up with a declaration of the Buddhist life of *brahmachariya* which is declared to be totally complete and pure [*kevala-paripunṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahmachariyaṃ pakāseti*]. A thorough study of the texts compel us to believe that these two items presented, as it were, in one and the same breath are complementary to each other, both supporting each other.

The trusting and faithful householders [*saddhāpaṭilābhena samannāgato*]

who hear the *dhamma* as declared by the Buddha come to the conclusion that it is no easy task for a householder who lives in the household to live the life of *brahmacariya* perfectly well. Under that conviction they opt to lead a life of renunciation.

Here we have to be reminded of the verse in the Muni Sutta of the Suttanipāta [Sn. v. 221] which tells us in no uncertain terms that both monks and lay persons, if they are pursuing liberation in Nirvana with an acceptable degree of honesty, have to pursue the same path. The only difference is in the speed at which they travel or speed which they can command. Buddhist reforms are urgently needed in Sri Lanka today to go into the study of these shady areas. We urgently need a parliament of competent Buddhist monks to look into Buddhist Internal Affairs.



## Stepping into the Buddhist Path to Liberation - 3

*Professor Bhikkhu Dhammavihari*

There is no over-stressing the fact that liberation in Buddhism means no more and no less than the stepping out of the turmoil of the living process in Saṃsāra, i.e. the ceaseless process of being born and dying again and again. If this is not your choice, you have no more need to be talking about Nirvana. This is what the Buddha himself achieved in Nirvana and brought within the reach of everybody else who strove for it. This has to be the theme of everyone who talks about Buddhism, in private or in public, in marketing goods or taking part in politics.

The Buddha indicates the difference between himself and those others who

claim to be Buddhists as that between a teacher who originally found a way [*anakkhātassa maggassa akkhātā*] and those who latterly follow that path [*maggānugā pacchā samannāgatā*].

It is interesting to follow, through the earliest Buddhist texts, how this process of cultural elevation towards a specific goal takes place in Buddhism. On hearing the declaration of his teachings by the Buddha, a trusting lay person, i.e. one who has ***sraddhā*** begins to understand and appreciate that the journey to Nirvana is exacting and demanding. This, the Buddhists realised more than two and a half millennia ago, long before the NASA scientists realised the difficulty of firing out a satellite into outer space, off a launch pad, without a precise countdown.

With a real earnestness for his liberation, the trusting lay disciple [*tena sadhhāpaṭilābhena samannāgato*] realises the difficulty of pursuing this higher religious life **while living in the household**. It is our conviction that this knowledge must be gained before everything else to make a good layman out of a layman and a good monk out of a monk. This awareness of the goal and the difficulty of achieving it makes the pursuit of the religious life a reality.

On gaining such a conviction, and nothing less than that, an honest disciple takes to a life of renunciation. Even others need a glow of this awareness, i.e. the need to cross over from the vast flood of Samsāra and get to the safety in Nirvana. That is why at the very second stage in the Noble Eight-fold Path one has to restructure one's thinking in the correct direction and start with *nekkhamma saṅkappo* or learn to pursue a reduction in the pursuit of pleasure.



## Layman's Link with the Life of Brahmachariya - 4

*Professor Dhammaviari Thera*

Now we have seen that if the Buddhist monk and the layman are both pursuing the goal of Nirvana, they are invariably on the same track, but travelling at different speeds. In the Suttanipāta simile, it is said that the blue-necked crested peacock shall never equal the goose in its speed. So shall the layman never equal the monk who is meditating in the solitude of the forest [*munino vivittassa vanamhi jhāyato*]. The text is quite clear in what it says. It is lamentable if we cannot see the difference or the stature of each.

Buddhist suttas make it quite clear, in more places than one, that the Buddhist has to commence his spiritual culture [call it religious, if you like] with a self correction in moral rectitude. In Buddhism, we believe, this has two aspects, namely personal goodness and social goodness. They both have a very high degree of ethical value. They are therefore both socio-ethical and religio-ethical. In Buddhist religious culture, they are brought under the category of *sīla*. The *sīla* of the monk is voluminous, grouped under three heads as minor, medium and major. The training and culture of those who have renounced the household life being the primary statutory function of the religion, at a later stage in monastic history some of these items of *sīla* of the monk have come to acquire a legal standing.

On the other hand, the basic ethical culture of the layman is brought under the five precepts of the *pañcasīla*. These, in their totality, is for regular day to day observance. No selection out of them, on any basis, is allowed. Lay persons must not take upon themselves the arrogance to make the observance of these precepts one of personal choice. It is no more and no less than take it or leave it. These, at their very bottom, are norms for healthy inter-personal relationships. If in their breach, you go beyond a specific point, you should know where you land

yourself. And this, of course, if this country by any chance has anything called a law enforcement authority.

For this reason, Buddhism refers to the breach of *pañcasīla* as *pañcabhayāni* or five dreads. Society must be made safe from such villainous activity of individuals or groups. This is its socio-ethical aspect. At the same time, such activity as the breach of the *pañcasīla*, self-ruinously corrode the moral character of the individual. For this reason they are called *pañcaverāni* and belong to the area of religio-ethical precepts. They are said to lead to degradation in the life after.



## Upgrading the Quality of Layman's Sīla - 5

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

The Buddhist layman's life is not to be mistaken as a static stagnant one. It is not an old jar or an abandoned barrel in which things are collected from time to time. Nor is it one into which things need to be put through the grace of another. It has to be like a well tended plant in cheerful surroundings which healthily grows into robustness and comes to bear flowers and fruit. Buddhism prescribes such a plan for every one. Most Buddhists in Sri Lanka seems to lack the good soil for the germination and growth of their religious life. Religious sunlight and clean *dhamma* water which can be freely had with a little bit of common sense is artfully shut out from them in the religious super structure of Sri Lanka today.

The significance of taking *tisarāṇa* or pledging one's loyalty to the Buddha, Dhamma and the Saṅgha is completely subverted by other forms of showing respect to the Buddha by making various forms of material offerings to him.

These do not seem to bring out adequate expression of the devotee's trust in the Master, in the efficacy of his Dhamma and the complete trustworthiness in the goal of Nirvana as exemplified by the Saṅgha. The original respectful offerings, in the Buddha's own words, stopped with flowers, lamps and perfumes as symbols of honor. It was more the Indian gods who accepted items of food and drink from the devotees and returned the balance back to the giver under the name of *prasādam* as an expression of divine grace and favor.

We have already indicated the basic value of *pañcasīla* in the life of the layman. With the underlying concept of *veramaṇī* or 'desisting from' with every item of *sīla*, all items of *sīla* are expected to bring about an adequate degree of restraint and discipline in that particular area of activity. The more you pull away from sensory gratification of the world, greater is your inner moral strength for your spiritual pursuits. Like in your motor car, the lower you come down in your gear, greater your pulling power.

Therefore the Buddhists are called upon to increase the five precepts of the *pañcasīla* to eight, making the *aṭṭhaṅga-uposatha-sīla* and observe them on the four *uposatha* days of the month. In the early days of the Sāsana, all four *uposathas* seem to have been observed with fair regularity. The nature of the additional precepts undertaken requires that this observance must necessarily spread over a period of day and night [*imañ ca divasaṃ imañ ca rattim*]. In Sri Lanka, the monks are absolutely silent about the duration of *aṭṭha-sīla* and market a counterfeit product of day time duration, from dawn to dusk, not exceeding twelve hours. We need a bureau of standards, manned by eminent members of the Saṅgha to look into these in this *dharma-dvīpa*. Even for these, we need law enforcement authorities.





## From Moral Rectitude to Culture of the Mind - 6

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

Healthy inter-personal relationships are prerequisites in any civilised society for the calm and composure of its membership. That is why Buddhism recommends *pañcasīla* as a socio-ethical system of day to day observance. But it must be remembered that Buddhist lay ethics consists of a two-tiered system. While the *pañcasīla* is for regular day to day observance, the higher-grade eight precept *uposatha-sīla* is recommended for regular observance on specified occasions.

But the higher grade *uposatha-sīla* of eight precepts hardly exists in Sri Lanka today. It has been buried alive by the religious hierarchy. Sri Lanka is the only Theravada Buddhist country where the original twenty-four hour observance is not respected. Reducing it to twelve hours of day-time observance, in this *dharmadvīpa*, from dawn to dusk, for whose convenience we have yet to determine, is no more than a mere mockery.

We believe that the concept of restraint or *samvara* which the additional precepts in the *uposatha sīla* introduce, i.e. 6,7 and 8 and the revised rule No.3, has hardly been put into the heads of the *uposatha* observers. In the list, at the time they are delivered, they are all strung together like herrings on a string. How could they know what they should know?

If this additional grooming via the precepts of the *uposatha sīla* has been brought about, a sense of willingness to let go would have been acquired. *vikālabhojajana*, *nacca-gītavādita*, *uccāsayanamahāsayana*, together with *abrahmacariya* imply comforts and enjoyments to which lay persons are entitled but which they willingly forego for special reasons. By way of thought restructuring, one would be seen moving away from *kāmasamkappa* towards *nekkhamma-samkappa*. There would evidently be a gathering together of one's

inner psychic strength. This would turn out to be a reliable basis for *jhānic* attainments.

With this unavoidable Buddhist Sāsana tradition that one embarks on mind culture, having consolidated one's position in moral grounding, we insist on a continuous and thorough grounding in *sīla* before embarking on what is known today as *bhāvanā* or meditation.

